. . . But he Had a Touch of Genius

FABULOUS FRAUDS

A True Crime Adventure

By CECIL CLARK

who could: Maurice de Lopatecki, assistant editor of The Evening Standard.

Lopatecki, renowned as a classical scholar, had studied at universities in England, Germany and France, was a doctor of philosophy and fluent in seven languages. He lived with a family called Sparrow on Cadboro Bay Road, not far out of town. I say not far out of town because in those days Fort Street ended about Linden Avenue; in fact, the old Ella mansion was the last house on Fort Street. After that it was Cadboro Bay Road, and Lopatecki lived at 36, between the Creases and Craigdarroch.

To this countryfield neighborhood went Branthaven one evening and showed Lopatecki the letters. Analyzing the phraseology, Lopatecki was of the opinion that the writer had a fair knowledge of both classical and modern Greek. Suddenly, as he studied one of the letters, something about it caught his interest. He took it over to the table near a lamp, looked at it more closely, then suddenly turned to the detective.

"I know this writing," he said. "I've seen it somewhere before."

Then it came to him in a flash. "That's Griffin's handwriting," he said.

"Who's Griffin?" queried the Mahoney operator.

Lopatecki explained.

"Are you absolutely sure?" asked Branthaven.

"Absolutely!" said the linguist. "He wrote several articles for The Standard, and that's his writing."

The indefatigable Branthaven kept Atherton in sight until he got him alone.

"Know me?" said the plainclothes man.

Atherton shook his head, although he suspected trouble. The detective made it plain that he knew both Atherton and Griffin, then got down to business.

At the end of ten minutes, the private detective learned this much: 1, Griffin was the writer of the threatening letters, and Atherton had posted one of them.

2. A few trial samples had been thrown in a wastepaper basket in Griffin's office, but Griffin told Atherton not to throw that paper out with the rest of the rubbish but to get rid of it elsewhere.

3. Atherton had hidden them in an attic above the offices of The Social World. At least that's what he said.

Privately Branthaven figured Atherton had stolen them from the trash to try a little blackmail if the opportunity offered. On the discarded pieces of paper, according to Atherton, were not only samples of Spanish and Greek phrases, but one scrap of paper had a telltale hand drawn on it.

"I want those samples," Branthaven told Atherton, "or you'll land in jail as an accessory. And don't tell Griffin we met."

The detective sensed he had an ally in Atherton, for the latter was getting fed up with his well-dressed partner, the man who promised to cut him in on a big deal in B.C., and now grudgingly gave him only a few dollars now and again. In fact, as Atherton morosely put it, "I even had to go digging a man's potato patch to get a few extra bucks!" It was said in a tone of shameful admission rather than of grievance.

Within the hour Branthaven had told Chief Bloomfield of his discoveries, and wired his boss in San Francisco for Griffin's full history and picture. Few police departments in the West used photographic "mug" pictures in those days, but in Los Angeles police supplied the alternative . . . a steel engraving!

Gribble, E, carriage painter (C McKay)
Gribble, H, prop Victoria Bazaar, 84 Government, res 12 Pioneer
Grierzer, J, helper, (Albion Iron Works) res Western Hotel
Griffin, G Hamilton, M D, B A, M E I, specialist, res Windsor
Griffiths, J W, clerk, res 139 Pandora
Griffiths, J, wharfinger (C P N Co) Collingwood farm, Lake district

The Victoria directory of 1888 listed the bogus "Dr." Griffin as a man of culture and achievement.

"You wouldn't have any samples of his writing in your office yet?" suggested the detective.

"No, I guess they were all thrown out with the waste paper," said Lopatecki. "Anyway, it was months ago."

It seemed to Branthaven as he left the house, after cautioning Lopatecki to say nothing about their meeting, that at last he'd got some kind of a break.

Next morning, early, he posted himself in Kosche's barber shop at the corner of Broughton and Government (where George Straith is now) and asked Carl Kosche to tell him when Dr. Griffin went by. He wanted to size up the suspect, unobserved. In due course the barber gave him the nod, and Branthaven took in the dandified, top-hatted figure of Griffin as he crossed Broughton Street. Though it was only a brief side glance, it was enough. Enough for Branthaven to make an immediate discovery.

DR. G. HAMILTON GRIFFIN was identical with "Doc" Griffin wanted in California on an embezzlement charge!

Then he remembered in conversation the night before, Lopatecki had mentioned that Griffin employed a young man, Benjamin Atherton, as a secretary. For a particular reason, based on a hunch, Branthaven decided to take a sneak look at Ben. That afternoon, hanging around the publishing office stairway, he saw Atherton, and promptly recognized him as the man who had put up bond for Griffin in California. The pair had disappeared when the bonds proved worthless.

It was Griffin alright. To round out the case there was the question of motive. Robert Dunsmuir filled in this when he told how Griffin had taken an option on some land at Nanaimo, then wanted Dunsmuir to buy it. "I've got all the land I need," Dunsmuir had countered, adding: "If you want to sell your land, you'd better produce some coal first."

Around town, while Griffin had lauded Dunsmuir's canny business sense, secretly he had been filled with rage at his failure to sell.

Henchman Atherton duly produced the scraps of paper, then followed the arrest of Griffin early one morning on Government Street. It was city police Sgt. John W. Walker who tapped him.

Griffin, still the dandy, came up before Sir Matthew Baillie Begbie at the Fall Assize, in November, 1888, first assize, by the way, to be held in the then brand new courthouse on Bastion Square. Found guilty, he was sentenced to five years' imprisonment. It was after that, with the help of U.S. and Canadian police departments that Chief Bloomfield back-tracked through his fantastic career.

HIS REAL NAME, it was discovered, was Jean Baptiste Le Blanc, and he was born on a plantation in Haiti, son of a French planter and a Negress slave. He himself had been a slave, but ran away one day to ship as a cook on a French square rigger.

Later, in London, he was janitor, then copy boy on a big London daily, and after that, in Paris, valet to Dr. Gustave Griffin with whom he toured the Holy Land for six years.

Next came three years in Athens, where Le Blanc's quick mind enabled him to master enough classical Greek and history to write articles on Greek philosophy for a London paper under the byline "Cosmos."

Finally the doctor fired him and Le Blanc went back to London and ultimately returned to Haiti to cut quite a dash.

Years later he appeared in New Orleans as president of a Negro bank, "The Colored People's Retreat" with imaginary assets of $300,000. He absconded with $100,000 in deposits and in 1875 popped up in New York as Dr. Griffin.

In 1877, while living in a rented cottage near Niagara Falls, attended by a Negro man servant, and up to his ears in debt, he went for a walk one morning and failed to return.

"Poor Dr. Griffin, he must have fallen over a cliff," was the consensus of local opinion.

But he hadn't; he's crossed to St. Catherines, Canada, and there married a Danish woman who had a little money (and who died mysteriously a year later) and finally turned up in Montreal as Dr. G. Hamilton Griffin to get the job of assistant city health officer.

Always impressive, always the dandy, finally one of his swindles backfired. He'd taken an option on the Victoria Hotel on Latour Street, then promptly turned the whole thing over for cash. The fast deal netted him six months in jail.

After that he swindled his way down the St. Lawrence to Prince Edward Island and the Maritimes, armed with bogus letters of credit. When he was occasionally caught, somehow or another he always managed to raise enough money to make restitution and save himself from jail.

In 1885, he turned up in Western Ontario travelling the railroads with a fistful of passes indicating he was correspondent for the Montreal Journal of Commerce, the London Free Press and the Hamilton Spectator. Although the papers didn't know he existed they did when his bills came pouring in; bills for food, clothing and hotel expenses.

OUT OF FUNDS

Occasionally on his travels he sold train conductors non-existent real estate. For a time he lectured on temperance and the Holy Land, and finally in 1886, married Nellie Lennox, a tailor's daughter, in London, Ont. The couple came west to spend their honeymoon in Victoria, staying at the Windsor Hotel. Then they went on to San Francisco where Griffin ran out of funds.

To get his luggage out of the clutches of the Melville Hotel, the doctor started a bogus railroad directory with ads at $10 a throw.

Next year he was in Los Angeles with a patent on a "smoke ball" guaranteed to cure asthma. Unloading the idea for cash, he then became president of the "Los Angeles Dry Sparkling Champagne Co." With a couple of bottles of re-labelled champagne, he took enough orders to get out of town, then opened up the "Southern California Land Bureau" in San Francisco. He'd cleaned up around $1,800 in this when the law caught up with him.

It was then his partner, Ben Atherton, went his bond (with phony bonds) and the pair took off for Victoria, B.C., Griffin's wife following later. Here he intended repeating his Latour Street deal with an option on Nanaimo land, but unfortunately ran up against that rock-ribbed Ayrshire product, Robert Dunsmuir.

Griffin served his time in the old B.C. Penitentiary at New Westminster, then, nine years later, one afternoon in the summer of 1897, some quick-eyed Victorian spotted him travelling on the train to Nanaimo.

"Just going up to look at some of my coal lands," said the 57-year-old adventurer, agreeably.

After which nothing more was heard of him.